

Recommendation 1632 (2003)¹

Teenagers in distress: a social and health-based approach to youth malaise

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is concerned that young people in Europe are increasingly engaging in behaviour likely to put their health and lives at risk. Such behaviour includes smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, illegal drug use, eating disorders and unprotected sexual activity. Other dangerous activities include self-strangulation, “trainsurfing” and crossing motorways, undertaken in the search for intense, exhilarating feelings. Most young people are well aware of the danger such behaviour poses for their health and lives.
2. Also worrying is the rise in the rate of suicide among young people, which in many European countries represents the second most frequent cause of death among teenagers, after road accidents.
3. Young people have their own reasons and motivations for engaging in such behaviour. Nevertheless, the increase in risk-taking activities indicates growing distress among young people in general.
4. In view of the rapidly changing social and economic environment, young people face an insecure and unpredictable future. In particular, high youth unemployment makes it difficult for them to integrate through the labour market. Alternative experience such as voluntary or community work should be encouraged.
5. The deterioration of social institutions and networks is one characteristic of the transformation of the social order. Former vehicles for social integration such as the family, the church, schools and trade unions have gradually lost their traditional influence. As the path into adulthood is no longer predictable, young people have to find their own way. The Assembly considers that the supportive role of the family, in particular, should be strengthened as the primary influence in fostering the successful integration of young people and that the member states should promote policies in line with this objective.
6. Young people in Council of Europe member states have to face specific changes and challenges in their societies. They have poor support networks and often lack adequate access to health care and information. These problems need to be addressed.
7. A major problem for young people in central and eastern Europe is the explosive increase of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/Aids. Low levels of awareness, deteriorating health care systems, poverty and high unemployment rates are all conditions fostering the rapid spread of the epidemic. Other signs pointing to the distress of young people in this region are rising suicide rates and increasing alcohol consumption.
8. The transition from childhood to responsible adulthood is a time when young people need strong support to manage this transition successfully and develop their capacities for “life management”. In recent decades this transition process has become longer and more complex. In order to manage the transition successfully, young people must be exposed to an extensive range of life experiences. These experiences

1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 25 November 2003 (see [Doc. 9986](#), report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Ouzký; and [Doc. 10000](#), opinion of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Shybko).



should include formal education and training; opportunities for wide-ranging social contact, recreation and travel - including abroad; opportunities to achieve and develop their talents; but also access to advice and counselling in a friendly and supportive environment.

9. In order to strengthen the ability of young people to cope with the uncertainty and unpredictability of their future, programmes to foster resilience should be made an integral part of general youth policies.

10. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite the member states:

10.1. in consultation with the relevant youth organisations, to pay greater attention to all forms of risk-taking behaviour among young people and provide for appropriate prevention and support measures in their national and regional youth policies;

10.2. to co-ordinate their child, youth and family policies with a view to preventing risk-taking behaviour through the establishment of strong and reliable social networks;

10.3. to promote policies designed to strengthen the role of parents in fostering the successful social integration of young people;

10.4. to devise or set up:

a. information and awareness campaigns for young people on the dangers to which they are exposed through tobacco, alcohol and drug consumption or abnormal dietary habits;

b. health education programmes, backed by better training for teaching and medical staff, to promote general health, mental health and sexual health;

c. suicide-prevention programmes;

d. violence prevention and awareness campaigns for young people;

e. prevention facilities, such as drop-in centres or advice booths, in particular outside the school environment, so that counsellors may hear teenagers' pleas for help and defuse crises;

f. provisions for emergency intervention, particularly within the hospital sector;

g. programmes designed to reduce the possibility of relapse;

h. measures to reduce the social cost of alcohol and tobacco consumption, including higher taxation on these products, and to bar minors from obtaining them;

i. strengthened drug prevention programmes for minors;

10.5. to seek the support of the mass media in pursuing the above objectives.

11. The Assembly also recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

11.1. instruct the relevant bodies of the Council of Europe dealing with health matters to consider young people as a particularly vulnerable group;

11.2. promote closer co-ordination between the youth, social cohesion, education and family law sectors in the Council of Europe in order to ensure the coherence of policies on children, youth and the family;

11.3. establish guidelines for dealing with the risk-taking behaviour of young people, including methods for improving their resilience;

11.4. launch programmes to establish institutionalised support directed specifically at young people in Council of Europe member countries in the areas of health care, information and prevention;

11.5. further research the causes of, and recent trends in, risk-taking behaviour among young people.